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TAGS: PGOV KDEM JO

SUBJECT: ASSOCIATIONS LAW AMENDMENTS INTRODUCED PUBLICLY,
EU WAVERS ON STRATEGY

REF: AMMAN 450

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Jordan's Minister of Social Development convened donors and international organizations on April 29 to discuss forward-looking amendments to a 2008 law that increased regulatory burdens and government oversight over civil society. She has been lobbying tribal conservatives and committee chairs in parliament in a bid to gain their support, but still expects changes that will make the amendments more restrictive when the bill comes to the floor. EU Embassies in Amman, who generally support the amendments, are divided over a strategy to express that support. End Summary.

Minister Talks About the Way Forward

¶2. (SBU) Minister of Social Development Hala Lattouf met with representatives of donor countries and international organizations on April 29 to brief them on proposed amendments to Jordan's controversial law on associations. The amendments, written in consultation with a coalition of sixteen Jordanian civil society organizations, are designed to blunt the impact of a 2008 law that drew international criticism for dramatically increasing regulatory burdens and government oversight over civil society (Ref A). Lattouf's meeting was part of a USAID-sponsored strategy designed to assist the Ministry of Social Development in building support for the amendments. Lattouf, who formerly worked as a staffer for UN agencies, is keenly aware of the need to build support for the amendment process in the international community.

¶3. (C) Lattouf emphasized that she was "working with the existing culture" and that the amendments were an attempt to meet conservatives halfway. In order to build support for the amendment package, she met with tribal MPs Abdulkarim Al-Dughmi and Abdulrauf Rawabdeh who are known opponents of the amendments and are likely to request more restrictive changes on the floor of parliament. Lattouf has also met with the labor committee and representatives of the various parliamentary blocs to explain the need for amendments and allay concerns about Islamist influence and lack of administrative competence in civil society. The Minister of Political Development and the Minister of Parliamentary Affairs, both political allies of Lattouf, are also engaged in lobbying efforts on behalf of the amendments in parliament.

¶4. (C) Lattouf said that she expected further changes to the amendments on the floor of parliament. Lattouf indicated that she is preparing to vigorously defend parts of the amendment package which she considers vulnerable to conservative MPs who want to place further restrictions on civil society. In particular, Lattouf said she "will fight" against any attempt to alter the system of approval for foreign funding or allow for prison time for those who

violate the law. Lattouf has heard that some MPs are planning an amendments that would alter the number of people needed to form an NGO. The amendments propose that 11 members are needed -- most civil society activists are lobbying for a lower number, which they argue will make it easier to form an organization. Opinions among parliamentarians vary, however, on whether the number of required founding members should be increased or decreased.

EU Divided on Strategy

¶5. (C) Poloff met with working level contacts from EU missions on the content and status of the associations law amendments on May 4. While most EU embassies in Amman are aware of the amendments and their importance, they have yet to fully engage on the issue. There are also disagreements among the group on the most productive and effective way to lobby for the amendments' passage. Joint demarches to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a joint press release, or informal behind-the-scenes interventions are all on the table, with different countries supporting different approaches. The group is aiming to come to a consensus by the middle of May, when the agenda for parliament's extraordinary session in June is expected to be announced.

Beecroft